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ABSTRACT

Two papers describing and reacting to the proposed abolition of a department of communication are contained in this document. The first paper ("Proposed Abolition of a Department of Communication" by Thorrel B. Fest) describes the factors that led the attack. Environmental factors--distrust of the discipline, decreasing funds, and increasingly numerous and complex demands on the institution from the legislature--are first presented. The staffing problems, internal conflicts, and political arrangements that made the department vulnerable to attack in the first place are next listed. The paper's final section suggests ways to avoid such attacks, including political awareness, increased size, and maintenance of a balance between teaching and research. The reasons for the attack, given in the second paper ("Reactions from a Faculty Member of a Communication Department in Crisis" by Donald K. Darnell), include too many students, low research output, low status of the discipline, and failure to gather information on the employment of graduates. Faculty faith in what they were doing, cost effectiveness, public opposition, and a lack of procedure for termination are then given as the reasons for the department's survival. The last section of the paper provides suggestions for helping a department in crisis: providing moral support, collecting data on enrollments and employment, stressing the importance of communcation education, and defining the discipline. (JL)

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THE COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT IN CRISIS

by

Thorrel B. Fest and Donald K. Darnell

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1. Proposed Abolition of a Department of Communication by Thorrel B. Fest

2. Reactions from a Faculty Member of a Communication Department in Crisis by Donald K. Darnell

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PROPOSED ABOLITION OF A DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

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PROPOSED ABOLITION OF A
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION
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Introduction

Proposals to strengthen or weaken a program or a department within an institution of higher education always have historical antecedents as well as immediate justifications. To expect that such proposals will be highly rational is unrealistic. It is equally unrealistic to expect that all factors or evidence leading to the advancement of such proposals will be fully and clearly stated and admitted. In addition, those faculty or administrators under attack almost always find it difficult to identify and evaluate the conditions, events and actions that may have contributed to their plight.

To understand what happened at the University of Colorado, Boulder, it is necessary to consider both the macro and micro factors. Thus this account or report will have three parts. First are the Environmental Elements. Second are the Elements Contributing to Department Vulnerability. Finally are some modest and obvious Suggestions for Survival and Security.

I. ENVIRONMENTAL ELEMENTS

There is a growing disenchantment with contemporary education and its products. Higher education has been the most recent area to be questioned. Increasing emphasis is begin placed on vocational and professional preparation. The humanistic areas are often considered as non-functional. Contributing to this perception (however false) is an inflow of students who often lack clear academic goals and whose motivations are mixed. We tend to use higher educational institutions as mechanisms to hold youth off the labor markets and hopefully in the process prepare them to function well once graduated. This has resulted in increasing enrollment pressures. The knowledge explosion, along with its technological components, has made the educational process increasingly expensive. And the competition for the discretionary share of the scarce resource, tax and gift money, has become intense. Proposals for abolition of programs are seldom raised in times of adequate financing. It is when budgets are strained and institutions, programs and individuals are vulnerable, that a search for "non-essential" elements surfaces.

Within that national trend and specifically within some faculties, there exists some distrust of the value of the discipline which we label Speech Communication. There is a more general acceptance of such disciplines as English, History, Philosophy and Sociology. The public worships at the shrine of science and not without reason. But there persists some elements of the Platonic view of rhetoric which compares it to cookery. People do communicate in individual and group situations. We manage to muddle through and we believe that we do so quite well. Why should we allocate resources to those who study the common and operationally successful functions?

Departments of communication and their faculties are often perceived as having only minimal relationships to significant areas of human affairs as compared to the impact of science, political science or sociology. Certain areas of student activities are sometimes viewed as questionable.

More specifically and perhaps damaging is a suspicion of practitioners of communication and especially oral communication. Both envy and stigma attach to lawyers, politicians, salespersons, advertisers and public relations personnel.

However unfair, unrepresentative or unwarranted such views may be, there is sufficient residual belief to provide an environment in which the thought of abolishing a department of communication may flourish.

Within such a broad framework, the University of Colorado had, and continues to have, specific conditions and situations that undoubtedly contributed to searches for programs that might be eliminated. In common with most educational institutions, the University suffers from financial constraints. Over the past ten years polarizations between the state legislature and the University and between faculty and the administrations have intensified. The quality of the University administration has been questioned. Many believe that the top administration has been fundamentally lacking in vision and leadership for the past 15 to 20 years. At the same time there has been an erosion of faculty role in governance and deterioration of morale. Apathy and verbage have replaced interest and action. Both faculty and administrators have been guilty of quite unrealistic analyses of problems and trends. Illustrative of the evidence that might be cited was the nationally publicized problems with the athletic program and specifically football deficits of over $1,000,000.

Accompanying the foregoing developments was a legislative tendency to exercise increasing control over line items in the University funding. The effect was reduced flexibility in the face of increasingly numerous and complex demands on the institution.

The current president succeeded in convincing the legislature to give him greater freedom in use of monies. He claimed quite correctly that he might thus reorganize some areas and increase efficiency. Thus, there was an assumed, if not categorically stated, goal of demonstrated performance on the part of the administration. "Make the best use of the tax dollar."

This administrative goal did not directly generate the proposal to abolish the Department of Communication. But the analysis and examination began and it had its effect on administration and services as well as the academic areas. In the academic areas, a policy of periodic program review had been instituted. This provided that each unit be examined with a view of improving and strengthening its operation. Few would argue the merit of such a policy. The general method was to select a limited number of academic units at any time and begin with a self-study in which the unit set forth its rationale and objectives along with problems and aspirations. The next step was a review and analysis by an internal committee of peers from other academic units. The third step was to bring in an external committee of peers from comparable departments or units. Finally, the several review reports were submitted to a Program Review Panel composed of respresentative University faculty and administration, including the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs. My understanding (which may be incorrect) is that the PRP considered only the several reports and held no hearings or conducted no interviews. The PRP made recommendations to the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs who was ultimately responsible for any implementation or action decisions. Note that the PRP reports to one of its own members.

II. DEPARTMENT VULNERABILITY

At one time the Department rostered some 35 or 36 full time faculty plus graduate teaching assistants. Included were Communication Disorders and Audiology, and Theatre. Both groups sought and received separate departmental status. A number of faculty questioned the wisdom of such changes but the separations were friendly and the interaction between departments and individual faculty members continued for some time but tended to diminish. More recently two faculty in the area of radio and television felt their personal and professional interests would be better served by joining the School of Journalism. The total active faculty was eventually reduced to eight including the chairman who was and is currently on leave for an NSF appointment in Saudi Arabia. Of those eight faculty only four are tenured: two full professors, one associate professor and one senior instructor. The "critical mass" was seriously eroded.

Such a situation leads naturally to problems of staffing and graduate advising. Upon the retirment of the senior faculty member in 1979 no comparable replacement was authorized. At the time the chairman went on leave (January 1982) no comparable replacement was provided by the college or university administration. Heavy teaching loads were met by appointment of graduate teaching personnel. (The Dean of Arts and Sciences approved these appointments.) The number of undergraduate majors and the number of graduate students was such as to place a heavy burden on the faculty and limit the time available for research. What had been a respectable graduate program in Organizational Communication in the 1970's declined.

Paralleling the foregoing was the department's difficulty in resolving some internal conflicts and achieving cooperative and productive work relationships. Some members were perceived as concerned with individual interests and activities to an extent that responsibilities to the department and students suffered. Coalitions developed and there was a general erosion of mutual trust among and between some faculty, and to some degree students at the graduate level tended to polarize. There were major differences as to the value of contributions of faculty to college and university committees and governance in general. There was an inability of some faculty to assess objectively the nature of individual and departmental actions and policies.

Finally there were some additional problems within the department. In late 1960's and early 1970's the department extended to the graduate student organization two votes in all elections and legislative matters, except graduate students could not be elected to, or sit in, the Executive Committee. Communication was the only department in the University to take such action. In a divided department the graduate students became a decisive factor. And gradually students became disenchanted and the organization reflected a very limited sample of opinion. Relatively recently the graduate students themselves recognized the problems attendant on the arrangement and voluntarily relinquished their votes. A second unfortunate event was a series of breakdowns in departmental administration.

III. SUGGESTIONS FOR AVOIDING SUCH ATTACKS

A. Understand that a college or university is an organization made up of people with self-interests, strengths and limitations similar to any other organization. Some structures and procedures are

unique such as the concept of tenure and personal autonomy in some aspects of work. The product is difficult to measure and therefore vulnerable. When competition for scarce resources is involved, academic objectivity suffers.

B. Seek to maintain a physical unit of respectable and manageable size. Size is not a substitute for substantive soundness in teaching and research. But attacks are generally leveled against the small and physically weak.

C. Clearly understand and appropriately articulate the nature and importance of the discipline, both within the institution and to the world beyond.

D. Develop and maintain interdisciplinary working relationships. This goes beyond providing effective service courses. Let your colleagues know of common concerns and learn of their work. Develop understanding.

E. Be appropriately involved in institutional governance.

F. Maintain a balance between teaching and research. Teaching will seldom be adequately rewarded in a university, but it is essential to survival. Somewhere in the department conduct, some research that has a social significance that is interpretable and understandable by others. It may be the price of survival.

REACTIONS FROM A FACULTY MEMBER OF A COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT IN CRISIS

by

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REACTIONS FROM A FACULTY MEMBER OF A COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT IN CRISIS

The termination of the department in which I have invested the major part of my career was recommended by the University Program Review Committee. There were, I think, several reasons for the recommendation, although it surprised me as some of the reasons may surprise you. (I presume that most of you are familiar with Dissonance Theory and will recognize that I am not reporting the FACTS but the products of my attempts to maintain homeostasis during an extended period of crisis.)

1. One reason for the termination proposal was that we were attracting too many students at all levels. With eight full time faculty, we had approximately 450 undergraduate majors, 30 MA students, and approximately 60 persons pursuing the PhD degree with more or less vigor. In addition, we enroll more than 2,000 non-major undergraduates each year. Not only were we suspect for attracting so many students, but we were (are) not very effective in teaching communication skills in the large lecture classes which have evolved to meet that kind of demand. The "pure theory" courses are difficult to distinguish in content from what other disciplines teach, and the difference in perspective (which is very real to me) is subtle enough to be easily ignored when the urge to cut SOMETHING hits. Ultimately, I think, the number of student credit hours being generated contributed to our survival (our getting, at least, a second chance), but it was also, I think, a part of the problem. We probably would have been wise to restrict enrollment (which we have now done) much earlier.

2. Our research output, especially single authored articles published in refereed journals, had dropped below an "acceptable" rate (though no general standard for comparison has yet been articulated). The level of research output

was not without reason or justification but they were not reasons or justifications that anyone wanted to hear, and it was a particularly vulnerable point. You can add to that that much research in communication is unorthodox from the perspective of other disciplines and is, therefore, unlikely to be fully appreciated by any committee from outside the discipline. Quantity as well as "quality" is important.

3. A third reason we were challenged had to do with the nature of our discipline--the question of whether we are a discipline. It was easy to point to our long history, to our academic organizations, to our journals, even to popular demand for "better communication" in politics, business, and interpersonal relations. It was not easy to point to some unique body of knowledge known only to the members of our discipline which must be taught in special prerequisite courses before students are admitted to "advanced study." The fact that everyone who has survived to reach college age knows a great deal about communication from experience (however inadequate or disorganized that knowledge may be) was, at one point, the unarguable disqualifier of our claim to disciplinary status.

4. A fourth problem we faced was that we simply didn't know whether and where our graduates of the last five years were employed. Many that we did know about were in jobs labled something other than "communicator" or "professor of communication," and there simply was no way to prove the significance of their work in communication to their job performance or their success in their chosen careers. (The principle of <u>equifinality</u> is not well understood by administrators or faculty.) We have now obtained a list of names and addresses from our alumni office, and we hope to be better prepared for that question <u>when</u> it comes up again. The information is not easy to gather and the argument still has to be made.

There are also, I think, several reasons why we weathered the storm. (I did not say survived, because it is too early to claim that.)

1. We believed in what we were doing.

2. We were highly cost/effective in producing student credit hours.

3. We were willing to (and did) go public with the recommendation rather than accepting a quiet graveside ceremony. We spent some chips doing it, but had we allowed our wounded pride to get in the way, we would be gone by now. Student demonstrations, letters from friends and alumni, and newspaper publicity helped, I think, to shift the burden of proof from our backs to that of the PRP. I doubt that these things directly convinced anyone of the value of the communication program to the university curriculum. The escalation of conflict at least permitted, and may have stimulated, some administrators to examine more than a single index of value before implementing the termination recomendation.

4. It may have worked to our advantage that explicit criteria and procedures for terminating programs were not in place. It provided a "procedural" issue which aroused some faculty members who were not about to engage the content issues to question the recommendation and delay the action. On the other hand, had there been specific criteria and procedures, we might reasonably have avoided the whole mess. However, the procedures which have since been formulated seem to address the issue of who has the power to decide rather than specific criteria which should influence the decision. I would urge you to become active advocates for addressing these issues on your campus before anyone has to negotiate them in the defensive climate that pervades the scene once a termination recommendation is made.

I would like to remind you that a year from now I may have a very different perception of the situation and of what works and what doesn't work.

What can individuals or an academic association do to help a department in crisis?

1. We can provide moral support to each other. The letters and phone calls we received may not have had great influence on the decision to terminate our department or not. (We are not yet certain of the outcome) They, undoubtedly, kept us going on some days when we might, without them, have thrown in the towel.

2. We can collect data on enrollments and employment of graduates and share that data with each other. A current national survey related to these matters might be helpful to someone in a similar situation. For example, the evidence which we did accumulate that demand for communication classes is not unique to our university was, I believe, helpful, and that kind of information may be even more helpful as more institutions face the prospects of dropping enrollments and the problems of retention which are beginning to come into focus.

3. Anyone who has any information or new arguments about the importance of communication education-training to finding jobs and/or self fulfillment during the "high tech" revolution which is upon us should share those with the rest of us. Although it is apparent to me that "adaptability" is going to be a key word in education in the next 20 years of rapid technological development and that the need for liberally educated persons will increase with the demand for high tech specialization, I can't argue that as effectively as we might if we put our heads together.

4. Finally, we need a consensual definition statement on what our discipline is about and what it does. That statement must be clear and understandable to administrators who do not share our faith in and enthusiasm for academic diversity.

My best idea (and it needs a lot of help to become the kind of statement needed) is that we (all of us) study relationships among persons, groups, and cultures and the factors which influence the forming, changing, and dissolution of those relationships--including the nature of persons, groups, and cultures, symbolic discourse in various forms, media, and contexts. Such a statement, though complex and abstract, might serve to clarify our relationship to each other (interpersonal, small group, intercultural, mass comm) and to other disciplines (as diverse as fine arts and computer science), and it even seems to point up a similarity to chemistry which studies relationships of another kind.

(Unfortunately, we do not have the equivalent of a periodic table, it is extremely difficult to get pure samples of the elements, and the number of catalysts and compounds is probably infinite, not to mention the cost of VERY LARGE test tubes.)

Whether my proposal is a beginning on a consensual definition or not, we do need some such statement backed by consensus and the authority of our regional and national organizations.

With the national economy in a sad state, with the educational system under attack from all sides, with pressure from "High tech" mounting to put more of our limited resources into engineering and related fields, I fully expect the "crisis" for our department and our discipline to continue for some time. It is a time for unity in departments, in disciplines, and in educational institutions. It is a time to emulate the muskox and suppress our wolfish tendencies. E PLURIBUS UNUM is a good motto for the time. It is sometimes translated "out of many one," and sometimes (more loosely)"united we stand or divided we fall." Crisis is a time for learning and a time for choice.